

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3253

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 15670

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, FR
SUBJ: THE CENTRIST DILEMMA: THIRD FORCE IN A BIPOLAR
SETTING

SUMMARY. EMBARRASSED AND DEMORALIZED BY THEIR POOR SHOW-
ING IN THE RECENT MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, THE TWO MAJORITY
CENTER PARTIES (CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATS, RADICAL
SOCIALISTS) ARE UNDERGOING ONE OF THEIR PERIODIC CRISES
OF IDENTITY. IDEOLOGICALLY COMMITTED TO A PROGRAM OF
SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS, THE CDS
AND RS HAVE SEEN THEIR PUBLIC CREDIBILITY AND VOTER
STRENGTH DIMINISH STEADILY SINCE THE MARCH 1976 CANTONAL
ELECTIONS, A DIRECT COROLLARY TO THE GOF'S FAILURE TO
PROMOTE OR ENACT ANY SIGNIFICANT LEGISLATIVE REFORM
PACKAGE. THE PARTIES HAVE ALSO BEEN BESET BY FACTIONAL
TENDENCIES, WEAK INTERNAL LEADERSHIP, AND A SHORTAGE OF
FUNDS, CHRONIC PROBLEMS WHICH HAVE HAMPERED THEIR POLI-
TICAL EFFECTIVENESS AND LIMITED THEIR INITIATIVE. DESPITE
PRESIDENT GISCARD'S FREQUENTLY STATED DESIRE TO BRIDGE
THE GAP THAT CURRENTLY DIVIDES THE COUNTRY INTO TWO
OPPOSING POLITICAL BLOCS, IN AN INCREASINGLY BIPOLARIZED
POLITICAL SETTING, THE CENTER HAS LOST A SUBSTANTIAL
PORTION OF ITS TRADITIONAL ELECTORATE AND FOR ALL PRAC-
TICAL PURPOSES HAS CEASED TO EXIST AS A
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"THIRD FORCE" OPTION. COMING AT A TIME WHEN GISCARD IS
BEING INCREASINGLY CHALLENGED BY GAULLISTS AND LEFT
OPPOSITION ALIKE, THE DECLINE OF THE CENTER CAN ONLY
FURTHER LIMIT HIS POLITICAL OPTIONS. END SUMMARY.

1. THE UNDERLYING PROBLEMS

CENTRIST ELECTORAL ANALYSTS HAD NOT EXPECTED THEIR PARTIES TO DO WELL IN THE MARCH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, BUT THE ACTUAL RESULTS WERE EVEN WORSE THAN ANTICIPATED: THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (CDS) LOST TO UNION OF THE LEFT LISTS IN 10 OF THE 18 LARGE CITIES (OVER 30,000) THAT IT HAD PREVIOUSLY CONTROLLED, AND THE RADICAL SOCIALISTS (RS) SAW MOST OF ITS PARTY LEADERS DEFEATED IN LOCAL ELECTIONS. THESE SETBACKS WERE ALL THE MORE UNSETTLING IN THAT THEY OCCURRED ON THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL, THE TRADITIONAL FOUNDATION OF CENTRIST STRENGTH. FOLLOWING THE MAJORITY'S POOR SHOWING IN THE MUNICIPALS BOTH THE GAULLISTS (RPR) AND THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS (RI - NOW PARTI REPUBLICAIN - OR PR) HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO RE-ORGANIZE AND RE-VITALIZE THEIR PARTIES WITH AN EYE TOWARD NEXT YEAR'S LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. THE CENTRISTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAVE YET TO DO ANY SERIOUS HOUSECLEANING. MOST OF THE ISSUES CONFRONTING THE CENTER PARTIES ARE NOT NEW, AND REFLECT CHRONIC PROBLEMS THAT HAVE UNDERMINED AND DIVIDED THE CENTRISTS SINCE THEIR DECISION IN 1974 TO JOIN THE PRESENT PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY. AMONG THE MORE SALIENT PROBLEMS ARE:

-- THE ABSENCE OF ANY NATIONAL PARTY APPARATUS CAPABLE OF ORGANIZING OR DIRECTING ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS. EACH LOCAL FEDERATION, (THE CENTRISTS DO NOT HAVE FEDERATIONS IN ALL DEPARTMENTS) CONDUCTS ITS OWN CAMPAIGN WITH ONLY MINIMAL NATIONAL PARTY SUPPORT. IN CONTRAST TO THE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHS OF

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THE RPR AND THE PR, THE CENTRISTS LACK ANY SORT OF COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE, AND RELY INSTEAD ON THEIR IMPLANTED STRENGTH IN WHAT HAVE BEEN TRADITIONALLY CENTER-VOTING AREAS, SUCH AS THE EAST AND THE WEST.

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-- ONE OF THE MORE DEBILITATING TENDENCIES OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS HAS BEEN THE MULTIPLICATION OF VARIOUS CENTRIST MOVEMENTS OR SPLINTER GROUPS (E.G. OLIVIER STIRN'S MOVEMENT OF SOCIAL LIBERALS, DE BENOUVILLE'S CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY, AND MAX LEJEUNE'S FRENCH DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST MOVEMENT), EACH CREATED AROUND A SPECIFIC PERSONALITY, BUT WITH LITTLE IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION AT CORE. AS CDS STATE SECRETARY BERNARD-REYMOND ONCE NOTED, THE DIFFERENCE AMONG CENTRIST GROUPS IS PERHAPS 5 PERCENT PHILOSOPHY, 10 PERCENT ELECTORATE, AND 85 PERCENT PERSONALITY. THUS, WHILE THERE IS NO DEARTH OF SECOND-RANK CENTER SPOKESMEN, THERE IS AT PRESENT NO SINGLE NATIONAL FIGURE ACCEPTABLE TO THE VARIOUS CENTER FACTIONS CAPABLE OF UNIFYING OR SPEAKING FOR THE "CENTRIST" POSITION. THIS TENDENCY TOWARDS FRACTIONALIZATION DOES LITTLE TO PROMOTE A PUBLIC IMAGE OF UNITY IN THE CENTER AND IN FACT DILUTES THE POLITICAL STRENGTH OF THE TWO ESTABLISHED CENTER PARTIES, THE CDS AND THE RS.

-- AN ALMOST PARANOID FEAR OF BEING "SWALLOWED UP" BY THE RPR OR PR HAS KEPT THE CENTER IN UNEASY ALLIANCE
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WITH ITS MAJORITY PARTY PARTNERS. HOWEVER, FACED WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF LOSING IN MAJORITY "PRIMARIES" IN THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, AND COGNIZANT OF THE NEED FOR GREATER MAJORITY COHESION IN THE FACE OF A UNITED LEFT OPPOSITION, THE CDS AND TO A LESSER EXTENT THE RS ARE NOW LOOKING LESS ASKANCE AT THE IDEA OF A LIMITED "MAJORITY PACT".

-- ALL POLITICAL PARTIES COMPLAIN ABOUT FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES, BUT THE PROBLEM IS PARTICULARLY ACUTE FOR THE CENTER. UNLIKE THE RPR AND TO A LESSER EXTENT THE

PR, NEITHER THE CDS NOR THE RS HAS BEEN ABLE TO GENERATE ANY SIGNIFICANT OUTSIDE FINANCIAL SUPPORT, PARTLY A CONSEQUENCE OF THEIR MARGINAL REPRESENTATION IN THE GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES. AS A RESULT, IN ADDITION TO THE USUAL PROBLEMS OF POORLY FUNDED ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS, INABILITY TO FUND NEEDED POLLS, ETC., THIS MEANS THAT NATIONAL PARTY STAFFS ARE SMALL AND ILL-EQUIPED, AND LOCAL FEDERATIONS OPERATE ON A PART-TIME AND/OR VOLUNTEER BASIS.

-- WHILE DIFFICULT TO QUANTIFY IN TERMS OF NUMBER OF VOTES, IT IS CLEAR THAT THE CENTER'S PASSAGE FROM PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT HAS COST IT ELECTORAL SUPPORT. BY AGREEING TO SUPPORT THE GOF IN 1974, THE CDS AND THE RS TOOK A GAMBLE WHICH TO DATE HAS FAILED TO PAY OFF -- NAMELY, THAT GOF REFORM LEGISLATION WOULD ENABLE THE CENTER TO RECOUP THE LOSS OF THOSE VOTERS WHO PREFERRED THE CENTER TO REMAIN IN OPPOSITION. STYMIED IN ITS EFFORTS TO PROMULGATE A COMPREHENSIVE REFORM PACKAGE IN PARLIAMENT, AND SUBSEQUENTLY "TAINTED" THROUGH GUILT BY ASSOCIATION WITH ITS MORE CONSERVATIVE PARLIAMENTARY ALLIES, THE CENTER HAS SEEN ITS REFORMIST IMAGE CO-OPTED BY THE LEFT OPPOSITION, TO A POINT WHERE MANY VOTERS NOW PRESUMABLY FEEL THAT ANY LEGISLATIVE REFORM PACKAGE WILL BE MORE CONFIDENTIAL

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FORTHCOMING FROM A LEFT RATHER THAN MAJORITY LEGISLATURE.

2. CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (CDS)

TWO MONTHS AFTER THE CABINET SHUFFLE WHICH OUSTED CDS PRESIDENT LECANUET FROM THE GOVERNMENT, THE CDS IS JUST BEGINNING TO UNDERGO SERIOUS INTERNAL DISCUSSIONS DESIGNED TO REFURBISH THE PARTY'S PUBLIC IMAGE AND TO RE-ESTABLISH PARTY GOALS. CDS LEADERS HAVE RECENTLY SOFTENED THEIR HITHERTO VITUPERATIVE OPPOSITION TO CHIRAC AND THE RPR, BUT GIVEN THE PARTY'S HISTORICAL DIFFERENCES WITH THE GAULLISTS IT IS UNLIKELY THAT ANYTHING MORE THAN AN UNEASY MODUS VIVENDI WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED BETWEEN THE TWO PARTIES. IN A MOVE OBVIOUSLY DESIGNED TO PRESENT A MORE INDEPENDENT PUBLIC IMAGE AND TO ALLAY FEARS OF DISAPPEARING FURTHER IN A LARGER ALLIANCE, THE CDS HAS ALSO SEVERED ITS "PREFERENTIAL" TIES WITH THE REPUBLICAN PARTY (PR), BUT FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT THE PARTY WILL CONTINUE TO BE ONE OF GISCARD'S AND BARRE'S STAUNCHEST SUPPORTERS.

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3. THE LARGEST OF THE CENTER PARTIES (ABOUT 25 DEPUTIES AND 50 SENATORS), THE CDS HAS NOT ADAPTED WELL TO A CHANGING POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT. LOCAL FEDERATIONS ARE DOMINATED BY AN AGING LEADERSHIP (MOST OF WHOM ARE LOCAL PERSONALITIES OR NOTABLES) AND RELY HEAVILY ON THE PARTY'S TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN-DEMOCRATIC-ORIENTED ELECTORAL BASE, AT A TIME WHEN SECULAR TRENDS AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, PARTICULARLY INCREASING URBANIZATION, ARE ALTERING THE COMPLEXION OF THE LOCAL ELECTORATE. THE CDS IS NOT ATTRACTING NEW VOTERS AND IS IN FACT LOSING MANY OF THE UNDER-35 ELECTORATE TO THE SOCIALIST PARTY (PS). ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL, THERE IS A SERIOUS LACK OF POTENTIAL LEADERS (IN THE 40-60 AGE RANGE) WITHIN THE PARTY ORGANIZATION. AT RECENT PARTY MEETINGS MANY YOUNGER PARTY MEMBERS HAVE COMPLAINED THAT THEY HAVE LITTLE OPPORTUNITY FOR ADVANCEMENT IN THE PARTY HIERARCHY DOMINATED BY MORE SENIOR MEMBERS. FOR THIS REASON MANY POTENTIAL NEW ADHERENTS AS WELL AS SOME YOUNGER PARTY MEMBERS ARE OPTING FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE PS, WHICH THEY FEEL OFFERS MORE POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE OR EVEN IMMEDIATE ADVANCEMENT.

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4. RADICAL SOCIALISTS (RS)

PROPORTIONALLY THE GREATEST MAJORITY PARTY LOSERS IN THE RECENT MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, RS CANDIDATES WERE DEFEATED NOT ONLY BY UNION OF THE LEFT LISTS, BUT ALSO BY CHIRAC-LED RPR LISTS IN PARIS. AS EVIDENCED BY THE RECENT RS PARTY CONGRESS (PARIS 14795), THE PARTY IS DEEPLY SPLIT BY PRO-CHIRAC AND PRO-GISCARD FACTIONS WHOSE CONTENTIOUSNESS DOMINATES INTERNAL PARTY CONCERNS. PARTY MORALE IS PRESENTLY AT A LOW EBB, WITH RUMORS ABOUNDING OF A FURTHER PARTY SPLIT ALONG CHIRACIAN/GISCARDIAN/SERVAN-SCHREIBER LINES, OR THE POSSIBILITY OF DISSIDENT MEMBERS REJOINING THE LEFT RADICALS, SIGNATORIES OF THE COMMON PROGRAM. HERE, TOO, LOCAL FEDERATIONS, WHERE THEY EXIST, ARE POORLY ORGANIZED AND DEPEND HEAVILY ON LOCAL NOTABLES. BECAUSE OF ITS POSITION AS THE OLDEST PARTY IN FRANCE, AND THE NATIONAL PROMINENCE OF SEVERAL OF ITS LEADERS, THE PARTY CONTINUES TO ENJOY A DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE NO LONGER COMMENSURATE WITH ITS RAPIDLY DIMINISHING ELECTORAL STRENGTH. THE ELECTION OF A NEW PARTY PRESIDENT, JEAN-JACQUES SERVAN-SCHREIBER, ONLY EXACERBATED FACTIONAL DIFFERENCES, AND THE PARTY SEEMS HEADED TOWARD A PROTRACTED PERIOD OF INSTABILITY.

5. COMMENT: IF THE MAJORITY HAS HOPES OF WINNING THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, THE CENTER PARTIES MUST AT LEAST RETAIN THE 35-40 SEATS THAT THEY CURRENTLY CONTROL IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. HOWEVER, STILL ORIENTED TOWARD AN ETHIC WHICH DOES NOT CONSIDER POLITICS TO BE A "PROFESSION," AND HANDICAPPED BY INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEFICIENCIES, THE CDS AND RS FACE AN UPHILL STRUGGLE. FOLLOWING THE MUNICIPAL ELECTORAL DEBACLE THE TWO PARTIES HAVE FINALLY BEGUN MOVING TOWARD AN ATTEMPTED REGULATION OF INTERNAL PARTY DIFFERENCES, A LIMITED REJUVENATION OF

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NATIONAL PARTY LEADERSHIP, AND THE PRESENTATION OF A MORE CLEAR-CUT DEFINITION OF A "CENTRIST" POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY WHICH DISTINGUISHES THE CENTER FROM THE OTHER PARTIES OF THE MAJORITY. UNTIL AND UNLESS THESE BASIC PROBLEMS ARE RESOLVED, THE CENTER WILL CONTINUE TO FACE AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE.
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